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SUBJECT: JUNE 12 ANNIVERSARY UNITES NIGERIAN OPPOSITION

GROUPS

REF: ABUJA 972

Classified By: Political Counselor Russell J. Hanks for Reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Despite a torrential rainstorm in Lagos on June 12, prominent opposition politicians and human rights activists gathered to mark the twelfth anniversary of the annulment of the 1993 presidential elections won by Chief MKO Abiola, politician and business icon who later died in detention in ¶1998. ANPP 2003 presidential candidate Muhammadu Buhari met with top politicians from the Southwest and Southeast and addressed a rally in the Lagos suburb of Magodo. The group paid a solidarity visit to Abiola's family, where they decried the annulment of the 1993 elections. This event could signal a turning point in the relationship between opposition leaders of the Southwest, Southeast, and North, and could redefine the political landscape ahead of the 2007 elections.

THE COMING TOGETHER OF STRANGE BED FELLOWS

¶2. (U) Twelve years after Chief MKO Abiola's election was annulled by then-military head of state Ibrahim Babangida (IBB), and seven years after Abiola's death, his memory was again celebrated on Sunday, June 12. Pro-democracy activists defied a day-long heavy downpour across the South to mark the day many Nigerians consider the true Democracy Day (reftel). The celebrations took place in many parts of the Southwest, including Lagos. In a visit that took on the atmosphere of a campaign stop, Muhammadu Buhari, presidential candidate of the All Nigerians Peoples Party (ANPP) brought progressives and conservatives together to honor Abiola: the winning candidate in elections widely viewed as the "freest elections in Nigeria's history." Celebrations also took place in North-Central Kaduna, although much smaller and without the big names in attendance.

¶3. (U) In Lagos, many simultaneous events occurred. At Yaba, prominent politicians under the auspices of United Action for Democracy (UAD) organized rallies at Tai Solarin Square while the Lagos State chapter of the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) held a press briefing at Ikeja to mark the event. In the nearby Excellence Hotel, Ogba, the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC), a pan-Yoruba tribal group, held a symposium.

¶4. (U) Meanwhile, Buhari led a coalition of June 12 exponents in addressing the crowd at Magodo. In his speech, Buhari told the crowd that the annulment of Chief Abiola's election in 1993 was a "crime against the wishes of the people." He took a swipe at "the deceitful economic policies of the Obasanjo administration," condemning the soaring corruption, decay of infrastructure, insecurity, and electoral malpractices. He warned that "those who annulled the June 12, 1993, elections are still around." Referring to the 2003 elections, he stated that in Nigerian math classes, students are being taught that "6-1-2 is equal to 4-1-9," a reference to the dates of the 1993 and 2003 elections.
(Note: "4-1-9" is the section of the criminal code dealing with advance fee fraud. End Note.)

SPEAKERS KNOCK OBASANJO

¶5. (SBU) Buhari argued that the lessons of the June 12, 1993 elections are that, contrary to the belief of the elites, "ethnicity and religion are only weapons in the hands of extremists, liars, and unpatriotic elements that use them for selfish goals." He said that the elites "balkanize the country by building cleavages of hatred among groups. They divide ethnic groups into sub-cultural bases and their religion into sects, thus raising tension and making the country vulnerable to crisis." Buhari also condemned the apparent ineffectiveness of the National Assembly, saying "the legislature we have under this system can be described

as a rubber stamp or even an extension of the executive." Perhaps emboldened by the positive crowd reaction, he declared the ruling PDP "dead," saying "all we need is to unite and organize a burial party."

¶16. (U) Lagos State Governor Bola Tinubu, an Abiola aide in 1993, said that June 12 represents transparency, accountability, and true federalism. He noted that June 12 represented a struggle between progressive forces and reactionaries, and urged Nigerians to resist the "imperialist rule in Abuja." He admonished the federal government for disobeying court verdicts pointing out that there would be no genuine democracy without the rule of law. In his speech, Senator Tokunbo Afikuyomi (Lagos West) regretted that Obasanjo, the greatest beneficiary of the June 12 struggle, had done nothing to immortalize Abiola, the symbol of that struggle.

¶17. (U) Long-time Igbo leader Dim Chukwuemeka Ojukwu, All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) presidential candidate in 2003, and former Information Minister and ANPP leader Chief John Nnia Nwodo were billed to lead the Southeastern delegation to the event, but did not arrive on time. The airports had been closed due to the heavy rains and two airline accidents earlier in the day, one at Lagos, the other at Jos. They sent messages via their cell phones and expressed their support for the democratic struggle.

BUHARI VISITS ABIOLA'S FAMILY

¶18. (C) Buhari paid a visit to the Abiola family, where he was warmly received. The public relations aspect of the visit was not lost on anyone, and his attention to the June 12 anniversary was appreciated by the family and assembled well-wishers. According to sources, Buhari also had a separate meeting with the bigwigs of the Alliance for Democracy (AD), one of the four major parties in Nigeria. Buhari's visit served to reopen communication between Tinubu, the only sitting AD governor, and his colleagues who were put out of office by the PDP in the flawed 2003 elections. The fence-mending extended to the OPC and factions of another pan-Yoruba group, Afenifere. One of Buhari's aides told PolOff that he had listened to some of the AD politicians' conversations while the group was assembled. He said he reported to Buhari that "much of the talk sounded like coup-plotting." According to the aide, Buhari replied, "Since that is what (Obasanjo) wants, so be it. Let them talk."

"PRETENDERS" IN GOVERNMENT

¶19. (SBU) At the Lagos Resource Center in Victoria Island, Father George Ehusani coordinated a symposium for prominent journalists, pro-democracy activists, and opposition politicians, the group chose as its theme, "Challenges of Democracy, 12 Years After June 1993 Presidential Election." Some of the speakers suggested that the current people in power were "pretenders to the throne" and "not the real June 12 sympathizers." Chief Frank Ovie-Kokori, former Secretary-General of the oil and gas workers' union, summed

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up the mood of the participants: "Those who came into power in 1999 were people who were not ready for governance."

¶10. (U) In Abeokuta, Ogun State, Abiola's home town, elements of the state government joined the pro-democracy groups to celebrate the day. Jamiu Abiola, one of the late politician's sons, said he had heard of the rumored presidential ambition of Babangida, the architect of the 1993 annulment. He warned Babangida against contesting in 2007: "if you insist on running, the handwriting is already on the wall."

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Buhari's visit to the Southwest served to reconcile competing factions among the political opposition and strengthen his standing in the region least disposed to his political activities. The new friends also cooperated in attending a June 25 conference in London together, where it appears that the Buhari camp is maintaining its efforts to galvanize an opposition to what many Nigerians view as Obasanjo's "autocratic and illegal governance."

CAMPBELL